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ABSTRACT

The popular notion that excellence in sports is inherited is seriously questioned by experts. The belief shared by many sports specialists as well as by some top athletes is that the characteristics that breed success in sports are developed. Sports experts offer the following advice to those who wish to improve their own performance: (1) relax; (2) reduce anxiety; (3) use imagery and mental rehearsal; (4) establish a good self-image; (5) concentrate; (6) be motivated and have a positive attitude; (7) develop rhythm; (8) accept failure; (9) be persistent; and (10) anticipate. Each individual has the potential of being a natural athlete within the limits of size and strength, and attitude may well be more important than ability. The same elements that promote excellence in the sports world promote excellence in education. Teachers can create environments in which students will be motivated to learn. Teachers can also assist in reducing some of the personal and academic barriers to excellent student performance. (EM)

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THE NATURAL ATHLETE: A COMFORTABLE MYTH

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THE NATURAL ATHLETE: A COMFORTABLE MYTH

(The notions captured in this recent article address issues that are as applicable to achieving great things professionally and personally in the academic environment as in the world of sports. The original focus and flavor of the excerpt have been retained here, trusting that our readers will enjoy drawing out their own interesting analogies.)

There is a popular notion that unless one has been blessed with some inherited talent for excelling in sports, one is doomed to a life of mediocrity in the sports world. Presently, however, some experts in motor learning, in motor behavior research, and in physiology are seriously questioning that idea. As well, some well-known champions in the sports world argue that their own experiences belie this myth of the natural athlete. In fact, they are going so far as to say that individuals who demonstrate exceptional athletic abilities differ from others only (1) in the notions that they carry around in their heads about their own potential and (2) in the quality and amount of practice time. As well, they agree that few of the skills required for most sports are influenced in any significant way by heredity.

Dr. Lawrence Morehouse, a physiologist at UCLA notes: "The average person who's healthy and normal inherits a pretty darn good set of genes. After all, the human gene pool is the product of millions of years of evolution to ensure the survival of our species. The differences between us are in the way we use our genes, and that's not genetic--it's behavioral." So it may well be that the natural athlete does not exist. Basketball's "Dr. J," Julius Erving, admits that he was not well-coordinated when he first began to play and that he improved over several years through daily practice and as a result of having good trainers and coaches. Bruce Jenner admits that he played lots of sports in high school but was never particularly good at any one sport; he describes himself as a mediocre player who chose to train six to eight hours a day in order to enter the Olympics decathlon competition. Serious training created an outstanding athlete, but he notes that his greatest asset was not physical, but mental--being mentally tougher than all of the other competitors. Ice-skating champion, Tai Babilonia, confesses that she had to work at being good at any sport; she attributes her success to dedication, to setting goals and striving for them, to having a good coach, and to loving and *wanting* to be the best.

These top athletes are excellent performers who share some common psychological characteristics that many sports specialists believe breed success: extraordinary motivation, positive attitude, good self-concept, use of mental rehearsal, anticipation, concentration, persistence, and much practice. Experts agree that all of these characteristics can be developed; they are not inherited traits. As well, reflecting upon these characteristics, experts offer this advice to those who would wish to improve upon their own performances.

Relax--Some tension is valuable; too much tension creates a psychological roadblock to meeting a performance goal.

Reduce anxiety--Anxiety breeds clumsiness, awkwardness, and distraction. Discovering what causes the anxiety can help reduce or eliminate it. By identifying the things about which you are fearful, you are provided with some direction for combating it. For example, if you are preoccupied with disappointing someone who is counting on you or looking foolish in front of a group, the debilitating anxiety you generate will seriously damage your performance.

Use imagery and mental rehearsal--It is important to rehearse your upcoming performance and visualize yourself succeeding in the competition. In fact, the difference between average and superior athletes is the psychological quality of the visualization: e.g., visualizing the act of not merely getting the golf ball out of the rough and onto the green, but getting it onto the green and into the cup.

Establish a good self-image--Experts say that this is one of the most important ingredients for success. What you think you are, you become! As well, poor self-concept creates anxiety, a major stumbling block to success. Unfortunately, many people carry around earlier negative messages from family or friends--e.g., you are a real sports klutz; and these messages serve to prevent you from *trying* to be as good as you wish to be.

Concentrate--It is important to understand the basic techniques of any sport; beyond that understanding, concentration is the difference between catching passes and dropping them, between making baskets and missing them. It is important to focus virtually all one's attention on the task at hand, rather than being distracted

by such worries as missing the basket or dropping the ball. It is at times like this that using relaxation techniques, using imagery techniques, or using cue words to block out all possible distractions--e.g., saying the word "ball" over and over to yourself during a tennis game--are helpful.

Be motivated and have a positive attitude--Enjoying what you do is strong motivation for continuing--e.g., athletes do not continue to work at sports they hate, and students do not enjoy dull reading assignments; it is difficult to motivate anyone to complete tasks that he finds loathsome. Experts report that internal motivation--such as having fun or feeling fulfilled by what you are doing--is much more powerful and persistent a force than is a more external motivator--such as attempting to please relatives and friends or achieve some fame and recognition for your accomplishment.

Develop rhythm--A performance should be as smooth and as effortless as possible; that is, the steps in achieving a smooth serve or pass should be so automatic and coordinated that the effort is an uninterrupted whole.

Accept failure--Successful athletes tend to be internally-oriented individuals who take responsibility for poor performances--that is, they say that a poor performance is the result of their not having made enough effort (e.g., concentrated or practiced well enough), rather than that someone or something else was responsible for their failure.

Be persistent--It is important to develop a temperament that does not give in to failure but rather reacts to it with persistence and motivation to work harder.

Anticipate--Being too engrossed in the present situation to look toward what might happen next contributes to a poor performance. Familiarizing yourself with some situations that could likely arise can prevent costly surprises.

This is all to say that each individual has the potential of being a natural athlete--within the more obvious limits of size and strength. There is widespread agreement that the difference between outstanding and average athletes is a minimum number of mental blocks that prevent them from achieving their goals. The myth of the natural athlete persists, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary. Perhaps it has persisted because it is a very comfortable myth! Unfortunately, it is much easier to explain away great talent and achievement in others by attributing their accomplishments to inherited "gifts"--those given at birth to some who are just fortunate to have been so blessed. To do otherwise--that is, to admit that the potential for these achievements is in all of us--is to face the unsettling possibility that with concerted effort we, too, could achieve those same goals. Uncomfortable as the notion may be, it appears that *attitude* may well be more important than ability.

So what does the myth of the natural athlete have to do with teaching and learning? I would contend that it has *everything* to do with what happens in our classrooms! Those same elements that promote excellence in the sports world--persistence, good training, hard work, tenacity, dedication to task--promote excellence in education. Teachers can create mind sets in students that they can and will succeed; they can create learning situations in which students can be successful, gaining the confidence--being motivated--to continue. Teachers can task students--expect and then demand a lot of them. They can create environments in which students will be motivated to continue the learning experience. They can focus on student's individual needs--frequently monitoring their work, identifying trouble spots early on, and providing appropriate instructional interventions that will make the most of students' time and effort. Reducing the number and significance of personal and academic barriers to excellent student performances is the teacher's most important role. The myth of the average student could well go the way of the myth of the natural athlete; they are comfortable myths that have survived too long.

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For further information, contact Dan Sperling, author of "The Myth of the Natural Athlete," *Review*, April, 1982.

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